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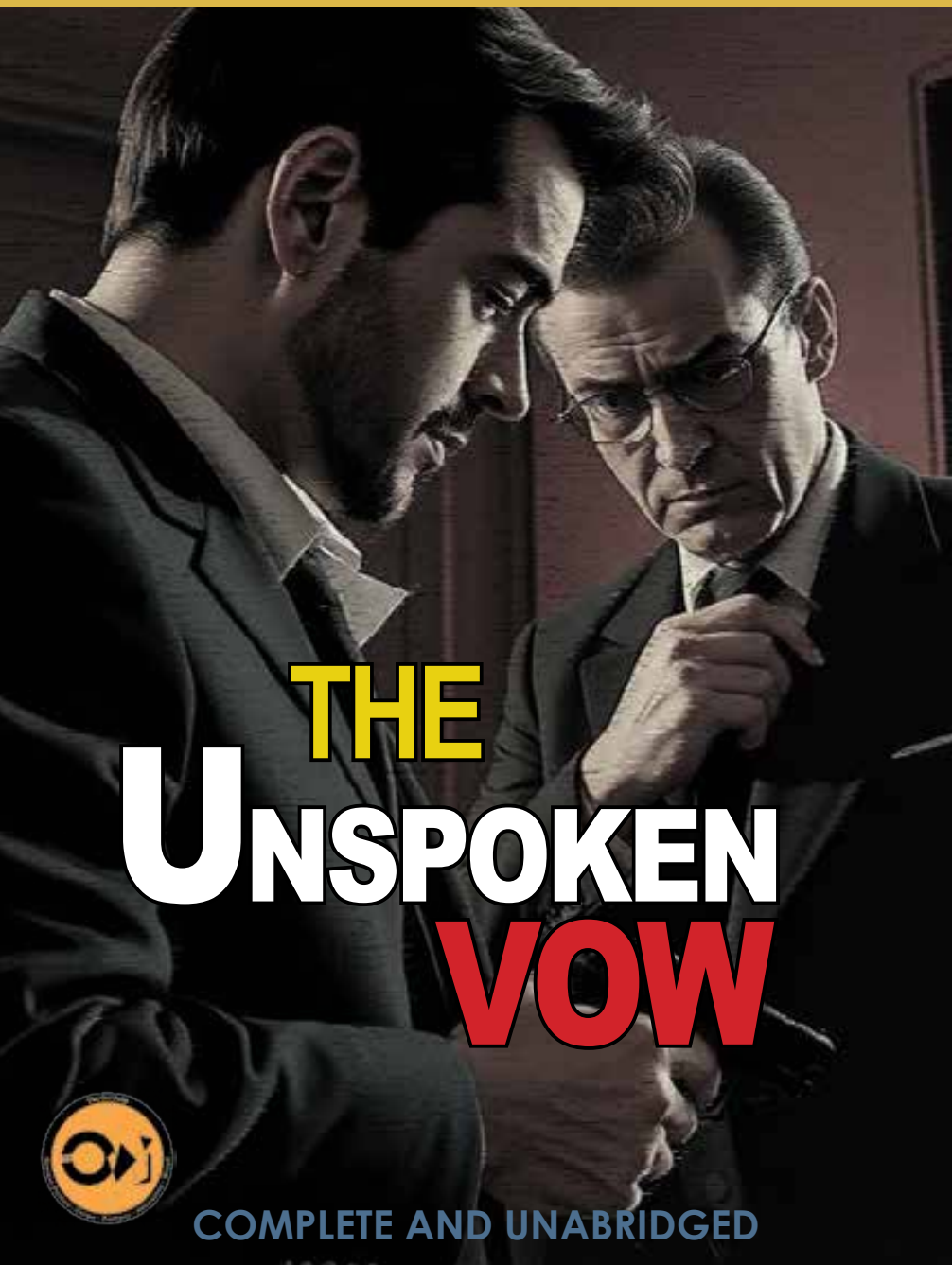

THE UNSPOKEN VOW

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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Ovi Pulp

The unspoken vow

Complete and unabridged

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The rain over Vienna fell in needles, cold, surgical, indifferent. It was 11:47 p.m. on a Tuesday in March, and the Graben was deserted. In a third-floor flat above a closed antiquarian bookshop, a dead man sat upright in a leather wingback chair. His name was Friedrich Kessler, a mid-level Austrian intelligence analyst with access to nothing particularly sensitive, which was why his murder made no sense.

His throat had been cut with a single pass of a scalpel. No struggle. No noise. The killer had been a professional. The blood had pooled neatly into his lap, darkening the tweed trousers to black. On his chest, pinned by a pearl-handled letter opener taken from his own desk, was a single photograph: a young boy, no more than ten, fishing on a loch in Scotland. The boy was laughing. The loch was ringed by pines and a grey sky.

Forty minutes later, a message reached a dead-letter drop in Bratislava via a cut-out who would later be found floating in the Danube. The message was four words in cipher, 'Der Maulwurf hat einen Namen.' The mole has a name.

It was rerouted to London by an analyst who didn't know what she was passing along. At 3:14 a.m., the duty officer at Vauxhall Cross decrypted it and read the second line: 'Und eine Schwäche.' And a weakness.

No one slept that night. In a basement safe flat in Clerkenwell, Lachlan Kidd stared at the ceiling and counted the cracks for the hundredth time. He didn't know it yet, but the photograph of the boy on the loch was about to become his problem. The boy was the son of his closest friend. And the mole was someone inside the Circus.

By dawn, the machinery of betrayal had already begun to turn.

1. The lacuna

Lachlan Kidd had been a ghost for so long that he sometimes forgot he had a face. Forty-three years old, six feet one inch, grey eyes that registered nothing and remembered everything. His hair was the colour of wet sand, receding slightly at the temples. He had a scar on his left palm from a broken wine glass during a failed extraction in Odessa in 2009, and a bullet fragment in his right calf that ached when the barometric pressure dropped. He was MI6's second-best field agent. He had been second-best for fifteen years.

The best was Alec Sutherland.

They had met in 1999 at Fort Monckton, the Victorian fort on the Solent where the Secret Intelligence Service trains its recruits. Sutherland was tall, dark-haired, with a rugby player's build and a mathemati-

cian's mind. Kidd was the quieter one, the observer. They were paired for the infamous "shopping mall" exercise, a forty-eight-hour surveillance detection run through Portsmouth and finished it in thirty-one hours. The instructors had never seen a better tandem.

Over the next two decades, they survived the Chechen hostage disaster of 2004, where Sutherland took a knife to the ribs protecting a captured British journalist. They ran agents inside Iran during the Green Movement. They shared a bottle of Macallan 25 after Sutherland's wife, Claire, died in a car bomb meant for another man, a man Sutherland had been protecting. Kidd had held his friend's hand at the hospital while the machines flatlined. He had watched Sutherland's face turn to stone.

They had bled for Queen and country and each other. Which made the last seventy-two hours unendurable.

Kidd's phone buzzed on the nightstand. The screen showed a single word, 'Rostov.' It was the operational codeword for "come in, we have a live one." He was dressed and out the door in ninety seconds.

The drive to Vauxhall Cross took twenty minutes in the pre-dawn dark. The building loomed like a post-

modern fortress on the south bank of the Thames, ziggurat tiers of glass and concrete, designed to repel car bombs and prying eyes. Kidd badged through three security checkpoints, took a lift down two floors below ground level, and walked into a conference room that didn't officially exist.

No windows. No clocks. No photographs on the walls. Three people sat at a steel table: Geoffrey Hargreaves, the Chief of Station for Counter-Intelligence, a man so pale and thin he looked like a ghost with a stutter; Eleanor Vance, head of the Russian Desk, sharp as a scalpel and twice as dangerous; and a man Kidd didn't recognize.

The stranger was perhaps sixty, silver-haired, with the upright stillness of a former special forces soldier. His hands rested flat on the table. He didn't introduce himself.

"Sit down, Kidd," Hargreaves said. His voice had a curious rhythm, a stutter that wasn't a stutter, just a weaponized hesitation. "We have a problem. It concerns your friend."

Kidd didn't sit. "Which friend?"

Vance slid a folder across the table. It was thin, four pages. Kidd opened it. The first page was a bank statement from the Cayman Islands. An account in the name of a shell company registered in Minsk. Quarterly deposits of seventy thousand pounds sterling, beginning two years ago. The beneficiary was listed as a trust fund whose sole signatory was one Alexander James Sutherland.

"He didn't declare it," Vance said. "Not to the Service. Not to HMRC. Not to his wife's estate."

Kidd closed the folder. "Alec is clean."

"So was Philby," Hargreaves whispered. "So was Cairncross. So was every traitor who ever sat in this building and drank our tea."

The silver-haired man spoke for the first time. His voice was gravel and ice. "You will surveil him, Kidd. No contact. No warning. No off-the-books meetings. If he is a traitor, you will bring him in or you will terminate. Do you understand?"

Kidd met his gaze. "And if he's not?"

"Then you'll have saved his life." A pause. "And proven your loyalty. Which, given your friendship, is not an unreasonable question."

Kidd felt the room tilt. He looked at Vance. She didn't look away. He looked at Hargreaves. The ghost stared back.

"Who are you?" Kidd asked the silver-haired man.

The man stood. He was shorter than Kidd but somehow filled the room. "Sir Martin Cross. Retired Deputy Chief. I'm here as an observer."

"An observer," Kidd repeated. "Or an executioner?"

Cross smiled. It didn't reach his eyes. "Those aren't mutually exclusive."

2. The briefing

The briefing lasted three hours. Vance laid out the evidence in meticulous detail: the Cayman account, the Minsk shell company, the quarterly deposits timed to coincide with Sutherland's overseas assignments. A financial analyst had flagged the pattern six weeks earlier. Since then, a quiet investigation had turned up nothing exculpatory.

"He has no unexplained absences," Vance said. "No foreign bank accounts in his own name. No mistresses, no gambling debts, no drug habits. He lives in a three-bedroom cottage in Surrey. He drives a ten-year-old Volvo. He buys his clothes off the rack at Marks & Spencer. On paper, he's a ghost."

"That's not suspicious," Kidd said. "That's tradecraft."

"It's also how Kim Philby lived," Hargreaves said. "Modest. Unremarkable. Untouchable."

Kidd turned to Cross. "Why me? There are a dozen officers in this building who could run surveillance on Sutherland. You're putting his best friend on him. That's either brilliant or sadistic."

Cross didn't blink. "You know his habits. His tells. His safe flats, his dead drops, his cover stories. If anyone can catch him, it's you. And if anyone can give him the benefit of the doubt and be wrong, it's also you. That's the point, Kidd. We need certainty. Not loyalty. Certainty."

Kidd looked back at the file. The photograph on the last page was of Sutherland's cottage, a half-timbered house with a rose garden and a bench dedicated to Claire. Sutherland sat on the bench alone, head bowed, a bunch of daffodils in his lap. The photograph had been taken three days ago.

"One more thing," Vance said. She pulled out a second photograph. It was grainy, blown up from a traffic camera in Riga. A man in a grey overcoat walking past

St. Peter's Church. The face was blurred, but the gait was unmistakable. "This was taken last month. Your friend made an unscheduled stop in Riga on his way back from Helsinki. He didn't log it. He didn't tell anyone. He was there for four hours."

"Riga is a hub for Russian intelligence," Hargreaves added. "The SVR runs two safe houses there. One of them is two blocks from St. Peter's."

Kidd studied the photograph. The man's left hand was in his pocket. His right hand held a newspaper. He was walking with a slight limp—old rugby injury, left knee. Sutherland's limp.

"I'll do it," Kidd said. "But not because you ordered me. Because if Alec has gone bad, I want to be the one to look him in the eye when he admits it."

Cross nodded. "You leave tonight. Your cover is a tourism attaché at the embassy in Helsinki. From there, you'll cross into Estonia and make your way to Riga by train. No direct flights. No paper trail. You'll be given a legend, a weapon, and a cyanide pill. The pill is non-negotiable."

"I don't take pills," Kidd said.

"You do now."

The meeting ended. Kidd walked out into the fluorescent-lit corridor and leaned against the wall. His hands were steady. His heart was not.

He had spent twenty years lying to enemies. Now he was going to spend the next week lying to his best friend.

3. The Judas game

Kidd's first move was a lie wrapped in a truth. He called Sutherland from a burner phone and suggested drinks at the Reform Club, their old haunt. Sutherland answered on the second ring, always the second ring, never the first and a habit from their training days.

"Lachlan. It's been a while."

"Six weeks. I was in Turkmenistan. No phone signal and worse whisky."

Sutherland laughed, a warm, tired sound. "You always did pick the shitholes. Reform Club, eight o'clock?"

"I'll buy the first round."

"You'll buy the first three. You make twice my salary."

They met in the library bar, a wood-panelled room that smelled of leather and old empire. Sutherland arrived late, seven minutes, his tie loose and his hair longer than regulation. He looked thinner than the last time Kidd had seen him, the hollows under his eyes deeper. But his handshake was firm, and his smile was the same one that had disarmed a Chechen warlord in 2004.

They talked of football, Arsenal's hopeless season and of retirement fantasies. Sutherland wanted a croft in the Hebrides, a fishing boat, and no phone. Kidd claimed he wanted a vineyard in Tuscany, though they both knew he'd never leave the Service.

"You're lying," Sutherland said, sipping his Macallan. "You'd be bored in a week."

"You'd be dead in a month. No one to shoot at."

Sutherland's smile flickered. "There's always someone to shoot at."

Kidd laughed at the right moments. He asked the right questions. But his training noted everything: Suth-

erland's left cuff was frayed (not a man living on secret payments), his shoes were resoled twice (no flash), and he never once glanced at his watch (a nervous tell of the guilty). He drank slowly. He ate nothing. He talked about Claire's rose garden with a softness that Kidd had never been able to fake.

Then Kidd planted the bait. "I'm being sent to Riga next week. Low-level meet a walk-in, check a dead drop. Boring as hell."

Sutherland's expression didn't change. "Riga in winter. You always did hate yourself."

"Someone has to hold the umbrella."

They finished their drinks. Sutherland stood, shook Kidd's hand, and walked out into the London rain. Kidd waited sixty seconds, then followed at a distance of two hundred metres.

Sutherland didn't go home. He took the Tube to King's Cross, bought a ticket to Cambridge, and boarded the 9:47 train. Kidd watched from the platform as the train pulled away. He didn't follow, he couldn't without burning his surveillance. Instead, he called Vance.

"He's going to Cambridge."

"We know. He has a contact there. We'll handle it."

"Who?"

Vance paused. "That's above your pay grade, Kidd. Stay on mission."

The line went dead.

Kidd stood on the platform, rain soaking his collar, and felt something cold settle in his chest. He had told Sutherland about Riga. If Sutherland was the mole, the Russians would know within hours. And if the Russians knew, the dead drop in Riga would be a killing ground.

He had just set a trap for his best friend. Or himself.

He didn't know which was worse.

4. The dead drop

Riga was beautiful in December, cobblestones slick with black ice, the Daugava River the colour of pewter, the spires of St. Peter's Church cutting the low grey sky like needles. Kidd arrived by train from Tallinn under a Canadian passport in the name of Michael O'Brien, a mining engineer with a fictional wife and a real fear of flying.

He took a room in the Hotel Latvia, a Soviet-era concrete tower that had been refurbished just enough to charge Western prices. His window faced the river. From the fifteenth floor, he could see the entire Old Town, including St. Peter's Church.

He ran a standard surveillance detection route on his first day: a circuitous walk through the market, a coffee at a café with two exits, a sudden turn into a bookshop, a pause to tie his shoe. No tail. No one watching. Either the Russians weren't interested, or they were very good.

On the third day, he made the dead drop.

St. Peter's Church was closed for restoration, but the scaffolding provided ample cover. Kidd found the loose brick behind the north transept exactly where the instructions had placed it. The gap behind it was empty. He reached inside, felt the wax paper, and withdrew a micro-SD card no larger than a fingernail.

He slipped it into his coat pocket. That was his mistake.

The two BMWs appeared from nowhere, one blocking the alley ahead, one behind. No sirens. No badges. Four men in dark overcoats emerged with the calm efficiency of professionals. Kidd reached for his weapon, but the first man was already inside his guard, a knuckle strike to the throat that dropped him to his knees.

They didn't speak. They didn't ask questions. They patted him down with practiced hands, found the micro-SD card, and took it. Then they beat him, efficient, controlled, brutal. Ribs cracked. His left eye swelled shut. They left him bleeding on the cobblestones, his coat soaked with freezing rain.

When he could stand, he found a note pinned to his collar. It was written in block Cyrillic, but he didn't need a translator. He had learned Russian in a basement in Fort Monckton eighteen years ago.

'Next time, bring Sutherland.'

Kidd limped back to the hotel, locked the door, and sat on the edge of the bed. His hands were shaking, not from fear, but from rage. Someone had known about the dead drop. Someone had told the Russians exactly when and where to find him.

The only person who knew about Riga was the man he'd told at the Reform Club.

Alec Sutherland.

But Sutherland hadn't just betrayed the Service. He had betrayed Kidd personally. He had fed him to the wolves and watched from the shadows.

Or had he?

Kidd pulled out his encrypted phone and typed a message to Vance, 'Drop compromised. I'm alive. Need extraction.'

The reply came seven minutes later, 'No extraction. Complete your mission. Identify Sutherland's handler or don't come back.'

Kidd stared at the screen. He was alone in a hostile city, his ribs fractured, his cover blown, and his own service had just ordered him to die if necessary. He thought of Sutherland's smile at the Reform Club. The frayed cuff. The daffodils on Claire's bench.

He didn't know what to believe anymore. But he knew one thing: he wasn't going to die in Riga. Not today. Not like this.

He stood up, ignoring the pain, and began to pack.

5. The interrogation

Kidd didn't wait for extraction. He booked a flight to London under his own name, a deliberate breach of protocol, a message to whoever was watching. If Sutherland wanted him dead, let him try on home soil.

He landed at Heathrow at 6 a.m., took the Tube to Clerkenwell, and picked up his spare car from a lock-up garage. Then he drove to Surrey.

Sutherland's cottage was a half-timbered affair at the end of a gravel lane, surrounded by sycamores and the silence of the English countryside. Kidd parked two hundred metres away and approached on foot through the woods. His ribs screamed with every step. His left eye had swollen shut entirely.

The back door was unlocked. It always was. Sutherland had never believed in locks, a quirk from their training days, when he'd argued that a locked door told an enemy you had something to hide.

Kidd stepped inside. The kitchen smelled of coffee and wood smoke. And there, sitting at the table with a bottle of Macallan and two glasses, was Alec Sutherland.

He looked up. His face was pale, composed, unsurprised. "You're bleeding on my floor."

Kidd didn't sit. "You sold me out."

"No." Sutherland poured two fingers of whisky into each glass. "I tried to save you."

Kidd laughed; a bitter, broken sound. "The dead drop in Riga was a trap. Only two people knew about it. Me and you. The Russians were waiting. Ergo..."

"Ergo, I'm the mole." Sutherland slid a file across the table. "Read that before you shoot me."

Kidd opened the file. Inside were photographs, bank statements, and a typed dossier. The photographs showed a silver-haired man meeting a known SVR officer in a Vienna café. The bank statements showed

offshore accounts in the Seychelles, totalling nearly twelve million pounds. The dossier identified the silver-haired man as Sir Martin Cross, retired Deputy Chief of MI6.

"Cross is the mole," Sutherland said quietly. "He's been selling NATO secrets to the Russians for seven years. The Cayman account in my name is a forgery—a frame job to make me the scapegoat. He's been feeding you information to make you believe I'm guilty. The Riga dead drop was his trap, not mine. He wanted you dead."

Kidd stared at the file. His hands were steady now. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because Cross has eyes everywhere. Including the Director's office. Including yours. I had to make them believe I was the mole. Let them set you on me. It was the only way to get you close enough to see the truth."

Kidd sat down heavily. The whisky burned his throat. "How long have you known?"

"Two years. Since Claire died." Sutherland's voice cracked. "The bomb that killed her wasn't meant for the other man. It was meant for me. Cross tried to

have me killed because I was getting too close to his network. He missed. He won't miss again."

Kidd poured another whisky. "What now?"

Sutherland smiled, the old, fierce smile of their youth. "Now we burn a spy chief."

6. The bait

The plan was simple, elegant, and insane. Sutherland had been gathering evidence on Cross for two years, but none of it was admissible. The photographs were circumstantial. The bank statements could be forgeries. Cross was too careful to leave a trail inside the Service.

They needed Cross to expose himself.

Sutherland proposed a honey trap: a fake Russian defector carrying a list of "penetrated" MI6 assets, all of them dead or long retired, except one. The one was Yelena Morozova, Cross's personal secretary. What Cross didn't know but Sutherland had discovered, was that Morozova was actually a sleeper agent for the SVR.

If Cross believed the defector was real, he would move to protect Morozova. And in doing so, he would reveal his hand.

"I'll play the defector," Kidd said.

"No." Sutherland shook his head. "Cross knows your face. He'll see the trap."

"Then who?"

Sutherland stood. "Me. I'm the only one he trusts, because he thinks I'm his patsy. He'll believe I've finally cracked, that I'm coming to him for help. He'll want to debrief me personally. That's when we record him."

Kidd stared at his friend. "If he suspects anything, he'll kill you."

"Then don't let him suspect."

They worked through the night, building the legend. Sutherland would claim that Kidd had confronted him about the Cayman account, that he had panicked and killed Kidd in self-defence, and that he needed Cross's help to flee the country. The fake list of assets would be the proof of his "value" to the Russians.

It was suicide dressed as strategy.

"You don't have to do this," Kidd said as dawn broke over the Surrey hills.

Sutherland raised his glass. "To old friends."

They drank.

7. The reunion

The meet was set for a disused tube station beneath Holborn, abandoned since the Blitz, now a clandestine rendezvous for the truly desperate. Sutherland had chosen it because it had only one entrance and no CCTV. Cross would feel safe there. Safe men make mistakes.

Kidd arrived two hours early, dressed as a maintenance worker. He planted three micro-recorders in the rafters and a fourth on his own person. Then he took position in a service tunnel with a clear line of sight to the platform.

At 10 p.m., Sutherland walked in. He was dishevelled, unshaven, carrying a rucksack. His hands were shaking, whether from fear or acting, Kidd couldn't tell.

Cross came alone. No guards. Just a slim man in a cashmere coat, walking into the dark with the confidence of a predator. He stopped ten feet from Sutherland and smiled.

"Alec. I heard you had a difficult week."

Sutherland's voice cracked. "I killed him. Kidd. He came to my house. He knew about the account. I panicked. I need help."

Cross tilted his head. "You killed Lachlan Kidd? The great Lachlan Kidd? And you came to me?"

"You're the only one who can get me out. I have something for you." Sutherland pulled a memory stick from his pocket. "A list of assets. Penetrated agents. The Russians will pay a fortune for it."

Cross took the memory stick. He turned it over in his fingers. Then he looked up at the rafters, directly at the hidden camera.

"You know, Alec," Cross said softly, "I've been doing this for thirty-five years. Do you really think I don't know a recording device when I see one?"

The trap snapped shut.

8. The firefight

Cross moved like a snake, fast, silent, lethal. His hand dipped into his coat and emerged with a silenced Walther. Sutherland dove behind a concrete pillar as the first round shattered the tile where he'd been standing.

Kidd was already running. His ribs screamed, but adrenaline drowned the pain. He burst from the service tunnel with his own weapon raised a Glock 19, standard issue and fired two rounds at Cross's position. The bullets sparked off the pillar.

Cross returned fire. The silenced shots were almost inaudible, just soft coughs and the thud of impact. Kidd felt a round pass his ear, close enough to burn.

Sutherland, bleeding from a graze on his shoulder, pulled a grenade from his coat. Not a real grenade, just a flash-bang, non-lethal. He pulled the pin and rolled it across the floor.

The explosion was deafening in the enclosed space. White light flooded the station. Cross staggered, hands to his face. Kidd closed the distance in three strides and tackled him to the ground.

They grappled in the dark. Cross was older but vicious, ex-SAS hand-to-hand. He drove a knee into Kidd's fractured ribs. Kidd's vision went white. He felt his grip loosen.

Cross raised the Walther to Kidd's forehead.

"You were always the loyal one," Cross whispered. "Pity."

Sutherland, still on the ground, fired a single round from his own weapon. The bullet took Cross in the right forearm. The Walther clattered to the floor. Cross screamed, a raw, animal sound.

Kidd rolled free, retrieved the Walther, and pressed the barrel against Cross's temple.

"You're under arrest, Sir Martin. By the authority of the Crown."

Cross laughed through the pain. "You have nothing. No evidence. No witnesses. It's your word against mine."

Sutherland limped over, holding his bleeding shoulder. "We have the recording."

"You have a blank memory stick. I swapped it when I took it from you." Cross's smile was bloody. "I've been doing this longer than you've been alive."

Kidd looked at Sutherland. Sutherland looked at the memory stick still in Cross's hand. Then he looked at Kidd and smiled.

"That's why I put a second recorder in my watch."

Cross's face went white.

9. The confession

They dragged Cross to a Vauxhall Cross safe house, not the official one, but a property Sutherland had kept off the books for years. It was a narrow townhouse in Pimlico, unremarkable from the street, fitted with soundproofing and a reinforced basement.

They tied Cross to a wooden chair in the basement. He was calm now, the pain and shock replaced by a cold, clinical arrogance. His right arm had been bandaged, but the bleeding had soaked through.

"You'll never prove anything," he said. "Yelena will disappear. The accounts are buried. The recording in your watch is inadmissible, illegal surveillance. You're just two rogue agents torturing a retired civil servant."

Sutherland leaned close. His shoulder had been dressed, but his face was grey with blood loss. "We don't need a court. We need the truth. For us."

And then he began to talk, not to Cross, but to Kidd. He laid out Cross's network: five agents, three cut-outs, two safe houses, and the name of the SVR handler in Moscow. All of it from memory, learned over two years of secret counter-surveillance.

Cross listened, his face draining of colour. "You've been recording this."

"Every word," Sutherland said. "For two years. Not on a watch. On a dead-man's switch connected to a server in Switzerland. If I die, the file goes to every news agency in Europe."

Cross's composure cracked. "You're insane."

"No," Sutherland said quietly. "I'm a man who lost his wife to a traitor. And I've waited two years to look him in the eye."

Kidd pulled out his phone and dialled the Director. "Sir. We have Sir Martin Cross in custody. He has confessed to espionage on behalf of the Russian Federation. You have fifteen minutes to send a legal team. After that, I call the BBC."

The Director's voice was cold. "Stand by, Kidd. Do nothing until I arrive."

The line went dead.

Cross looked at Kidd. "You're making a mistake. The Service will bury this. They always do."

Kidd didn't answer. He just sat down against the wall, closed his eyes, and waited.

10. The director's silence

The Director arrived with a team of six, all lawyers, all loyal to him. He was a small man with a large reputation, a former ambassador who had never run an operation in his life. He looked at Cross, then at Kidd and Sutherland, and his face was unreadable.

"You've exceeded your authority," he said.

"We've caught a traitor," Sutherland replied. "That's our authority."

The Director walked to the corner of the room, out of earshot. He made a phone call, short, murmured, decisive. Then he returned.

"Sir Martin Cross will be detained pending an internal inquiry. You will hand over all evidence, including the recordings. You will say nothing to anyone. You will go home and wait."

Kidd stood. "An internal inquiry. You mean you're going to bury it."

The Director's eyes were cold. "I mean we're going to protect the Service. Cross is a legend. His exposure would destroy us. There are ways to handle this that don't involve public trials and tabloid headlines."

"He murdered my wife," Sutherland said, his voice barely a whisper.

The Director looked at him for a long moment. Then he turned and walked out of the basement.

The lawyers moved in. They took the recordings. They took the photographs, the bank statements, the dossier. They untied Cross and led him away, his arm still bleeding, his smile back in place.

Kidd and Sutherland stood alone in the empty basement.

"They're going to let him go," Kidd said.

"No," Sutherland said. "They're going to give him a pension and a quiet retirement in the country. That's how the Circus works."

Kidd looked at his friend. "What do you want to do?"

Sutherland's eyes were hard. "The only thing we can do. Burn it all down."

11. The leak

Kidd made the copies before the lawyers arrived. Three memory sticks, hidden in three locations: one in his safe flat, one in Sutherland's cottage, one in a locker at Paddington Station. He had learned never to trust the Service to do the right thing.

That night, he typed an encrypted email to three news outlets, the Guardian, the Times and the BBC, along with the parliamentary oversight committee and the CIA liaison in London. He attached the recording of Cross's confession and the photographic evidence. Then he hit send.

At 6 a.m., the story broke.

By 8 a.m., Sir Martin Cross was in custody; real custody, not the Service's version. By noon, Yelena Morozova was intercepted at Heathrow with a fake Canadian passport. By evening, the Prime Minister had called for an emergency inquiry. The Director resigned before lunch.

Kidd and Sutherland sat in a pub near Waterloo, ignored by the world, drinking cheap lager. The television above the bar was showing rolling news coverage of the scandal.

"They'll never thank us," Sutherland said.

"I don't need thanks." Kidd sipped his beer. "I need you to stop getting shot."

Sutherland touched his bandaged shoulder. "Deal."

They sat in silence for a long time. Outside, the London rain had finally stopped.

12. The wound that remained

But some wounds don't heal. A week after Cross's arrest, Kidd received a photograph by courier, no note, no return address. The envelope was plain brown paper, postmarked Vienna. Inside was a single image, a young boy fishing on a loch in Scotland. The same image from the Vienna prologue. The same boy.

On the back, handwritten in block capitals 'YOUR NEXT ASSIGNMENT.'

Kidd knew the boy. It was Sutherland's son, Jamie, living under a protected identity in the Highlands since his mother's death. The location was supposed to be known only to three people, Sutherland, Kidd and the Service's witness protection coordinator.

Someone had found him.

Kidd didn't tell Sutherland. He couldn't. His friend had lost enough. Instead, he began to hunt alone.

The photograph's metadata led to a print shop in Prague. The print shop's customer logs led to a dead SVR agent's flat in Budapest. The flat contained a single piece of paper: a name. Colonel Arkady Volkov, SVR Directorate S, the same handler Cross had sold secrets to.

Volkov wasn't vengeful. He was practical. He wanted Sutherland's son as leverage to force Sutherland to kill Kidd, the man who had exposed Cross, and thereby destroy the remaining evidence. It was a classic kompromat play: turn the asset's friend into his enemy.

Kidd booked a flight to Inverness.

13. The ghost

The Scottish Highlands in February were brutal, wind-driven sleet, roads slick with black ice, the sun a pale memory by 3 p.m. Kidd drove north from Inverness in a rented Land Rover, following a single-track road that wound through pine forests and empty glens.

Jamie Sutherland's safe house was a converted croft on the shore of Loch Morar, accessible only by a dirt track. The boy lived there with his grandmother, Claire's mother, an elderly woman who thought her son-in-law worked for the Foreign Office.

Kidd parked half a mile away and approached on foot through the trees. His ribs had healed, but the cold made them ache. He carried a rifle, a suppressed Accuracy International, borrowed from an armourer who owed him a favour.

He found the sniper before the sniper found him.

The man was lying prone on a rocky outcrop overlooking the croft, his rifle aimed at the front door. He wore ghillie camouflage and a balaclava. His breathing was slow, controlled. He was waiting for a signal.

Kidd circled behind him, moving from tree to tree, silent as smoke. When he was ten feet away, he stood and aimed the rifle at the back of the man's head.

"Don't move."

The sniper froze. His hands slowly rose from his weapon.

"Who sent you?" Kidd asked.

"Volkov."

"How many others?"

"Just me. I was supposed to observe. Report. No shooting unless ordered."

Kidd considered his options. He could kill the man, it would be clean, justifiable. But murder would bring more killers. Instead, he took the sniper's phone, recorded a short video of the man's face, and sent it to Volkov's known number with a message:

'Touch the boy, and I will find your daughter in Minsk. Her name is Irina. She studies piano at the Conservatory. She has your eyes.'

The reply came within minutes: 'We have an understanding, Kidd. The boy is safe. For now.'

Kidd released the sniper, took his rifle, and watched him disappear into the trees. Then he walked down to the croft, knocked on the door, and introduced himself to Jamie Sutherland as an old friend of his father's.

The boy was ten years old, with his mother's smile and his father's eyes. He offered Kidd a cup of tea and asked if he wanted to see the fishing rod he'd got for Christmas.

Kidd stayed for an hour. Then he drove back to Inverness and called Sutherland.

"Alec. We need to talk."

14. The reckon

Sutherland arrived in Inverness the next morning, pale and silent. Kidd met him at the airport and drove him to a hotel on the river. They sat in a room overlooking the Ness, and Kidd told him everything, the photograph, the sniper, Volkov, the daughter in Minsk.

Sutherland didn't shout. He didn't cry. He just sat very still, his hands flat on the table, his face a mask of stone.

"You saved my son," he said finally.

"That's what friends do."

"And Volkov?"

"He'll leave Jamie alone. I made sure of it."

Sutherland looked out the window at the grey river. "I should have been there."

"You couldn't have known."

"I should have known. It's my job to know." He turned to Kidd. "I'm sorry. For everything. For Riga. For dragging you into this."

Kidd shook his head. "You didn't drag me. I walked."

They sat in silence for a long time. Then Sutherland stood.

"I'm going to see my son."

"I'll drive you."

"No." Sutherland's voice was soft. "This I do alone."

Kidd watched him walk out of the hotel and into the sleet. He didn't follow. Some distances you have to give a man.

15. The debrief

The parliamentary inquiry lasted six weeks. Kidd and Sutherland testified for three days each, under oath, in a wood-panelled committee room overlooking Whitehall. The MPs were hostile at first—two rogue agents who had embarrassed the Service and destabilized the government. But the evidence was undeniable. Cross was convicted in absentia (he had died of a heart attack in Belmarsh prison before the trial, though some said the heart attack was assisted). Yelena Morozova was deported to Russia in a spy swap. The Director retired to his country estate and never spoke publicly again.

The final report cleared Kidd and Sutherland of all wrongdoing. It also recommended that neither be trusted with field work ever again.

Sutherland took a desk job in the archives, a quiet purgatory of filing cabinets and forgotten secrets. Kidd resigned.

On his last day at Vauxhall Cross, he cleaned out his locker. Inside, tucked behind an old first-aid kit and a photograph of a fishing loch, was a folded note in Sutherland's handwriting:

'The unspoken vow: no man left behind.'

Kidd smiled. He pocketed the note and walked out into the London rain for the last time.

16. The retirement

Six months later, Kidd was fishing on a quiet loch in the Highlands, not the same one as Jamie Sutherland's, but close. He had bought a small croft with his pension and a small boat with his savings. He spent his mornings on the water, his afternoons cutting peat, and his evenings reading old spy novels and pretending he didn't miss the adrenaline.

His phone buzzed. A text from an unknown number, 'Volkov is dead. Car accident, Minsk. Unrelated.'

Kidd didn't believe in unrelated. He looked across the water. A figure stood on the far shore, Alec Sutherland, holding a fishing rod. He was thinner than before, and his hair had gone grey at the temples, but his stance was the same.

They didn't wave. They didn't call out. They just fished, two old spies pretending the world wasn't still full of shadows.

An hour later, Sutherland rowed across the loch in a small dinghy. He tied up at Kidd's dock and climbed onto the jetty.

"You're looking old," Kidd said.

"You're looking retired. It suits you."

"It doesn't."

Sutherland sat down on the jetty, his feet hanging over the water. "I got a letter. Geneva."

"What kind of letter?"

"The kind you burn." He pulled a folded piece of paper from his coat. "Read it."

Kidd read it. The letter was short, typed, no signature. It mentioned a man named Aris Thorne, British, wealthy, untouchable. Thorne was building a private intelligence network larger than MI6, funded by Russian oligarchs and Middle Eastern sovereign wealth funds. He had recruited former CIA, former Mossad,

former GRU. He was selling access to everyone and loyalty to no one.

The last page read: *We need you. Both of you. One last time.*

Kidd handed the letter back. “I’m retired.”

“So am I.”

A pause. The wind picked up across the loch, ruffling the dark water.

“What time’s the train to Geneva?” Kidd asked.

Sutherland smiled. “Tomorrow. 6 a.m. from King’s Cross.”

“I’ll bring the whisky.”

17. The new enemy

They met at St. Pancras International at 5:30 a.m., each carrying a single bag. No mission brief. No backup. No official sanction. Just two middle-aged men with bad knees, good instincts, and a lifetime of secrets.

"You know this is probably a trap," Sutherland said as they boarded the 6:01 to Paris.

"Probably," Kidd agreed.

"And we're going anyway."

Kidd looked out the window as London fell away, the grey towers, the winding Thames, the life he had left behind. “Because no one else will.”

The train slid into the Channel Tunnel, and for a long moment, there was only darkness and the rhythm of steel on steel. Then light, France, then Switzerland, then whatever came after.

They didn’t know if they would win. They didn’t know if they would survive. But they knew the one truth that had carried them through twenty years of lies, twenty years of blood, twenty years of watching each other’s backs:

Some vows are never spoken. And some are never broken.

18. The unspoken vow

Geneva was cold in October, the lake the colour of gunmetal, the Jet d'Eau spraying its white plume against a low grey sky. Kidd and Sutherland checked into a small hotel near thetrain station, using passports that identified them as Canadian businessmen. They didn't know who had sent the letter. They didn't know if they could trust the source. But they knew Aris Thorne was real.

That evening, they walked along the Quai du Mont-Blanc, watching the lights come on across the water. A woman approached them, mid-thirties, dark hair, expensive coat, eyes that missed nothing. She handed Sutherland an envelope and walked away without a word.

Inside the envelope was a single photograph: Aris Thorne, standing on the deck of a superyacht in Monaco, shaking hands with a man Kidd recognized as a former deputy director of the CIA.

On the back, typed: 'Thorne is meeting his Russian contacts tomorrow night. Villa La Fenêtre, above Cologny. 8 p.m. Come alone. Come armed.'

Kidd looked at Sutherland. "We're not coming alone. And we're not coming armed. We're coming smart."

They spent the night planning. Sutherland would approach the villa from the east, Kidd from the west. They would use the darkness, the terrain, and forty years of combined experience. They wouldn't kill Thorne, they would record him, expose him, burn him the same way they had burned Cross.

It was a good plan. It was also a trap but they didn't know that yet.

The next night, they climbed the hill above Cologny, through vineyards and olive trees, until the villa appeared, a white mansion with tall windows, a swimming pool glowing turquoise, and a dozen armed guards patrolling the grounds.

Kidd whispered into his earpiece: "In position."

Sutherland's voice came back, soft and steady: "In position. On your signal."

Kidd watched the villa. He thought of Claire, dead in a car bomb. He thought of Jamie, fishing on a loch, unaware that men had come to kill him. He thought of Cross, dying in a prison cell, unrepentant to the end.

Then he thought of the unspoken vow, the one that had carried him through twenty years of darkness.

"Go," he said.

They moved.

* * * * *

The villa erupted in chaos, gunfire, shouting, the shatter of glass. But that's a story for another time. What matters is this, two old spies, long past their prime, walked into a trap and walked out again, because they had something that no enemy could buy and no traitor could steal.

They had each other.

And that was enough.

The End

The unspoken vow

Ovi Pulp

Ovi eBook Publishing 2026

Ovi eBook Publishing
Narrative/Design: Thanos

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His throat had been cut with a single pass of a scalpel. No struggle. No noise. The killer had been a professional.

Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.

THE UNSPOKEN VOW

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED